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Exploring Dialectical Tensions of Leading Volunteers in Two Community Choirs

Cameron W. Piercy

Michael W. Kramer

Cameron Piercy is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management at the University of Central Missouri. Michael W. Kramer is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma. The authors would like to thank students in Kramer's Com 4974 Capstone Course and Rebecca Meisenbach for assistance in the data collection for this study. Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be addressed to Cameron Piercy, Department of Management, University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg, MO, USA, 64093. Email: cpiercy@ucmo.edu

Abstract

Leaders of volunteers face different challenges than leaders of paid employees due to different motivations and reward expectations. After synthesizing previous research applying dialectical theory to group members or leaders, this study examines the dialectical tensions that leaders of volunteers experienced and the communication they used to manage those tensions as reported by both the leaders and the volunteers. A constant comparison method was used to analyze observations and interviews of members and leaders of two community choirs. The findings suggest that leaders of volunteers face eight dialectical tensions representing three broad categories: a) task and relationship; b) process and outcome; and c) internal and external. Leaders negotiated these dialectical tensions through communication strategies including use of humor and appeals to artistic spirituality. These strategies represent hybridization and dualistic discourse rather than a monologic emphasis of one course of action over another.

Keywords: Voluntary Organization, Leadership, Dialectical Tensions, Humor, Constant Comparison Method

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The volunteer turnover rate is over 35% annually in the United States (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016). By contrast, the turnover rate for paid employees is less than 4% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This turnover rate discrepancy highlights that leaders in nonprofit organizations face exigencies that for-profit leaders may not due to the transient membership of volunteers (Riggio, Bass, & Orr, 2004). Thus, voluntary organizations represent novel sites for investigating the challenges of leadership. Nonprofit organizations have unique structures, offer non-monetary rewards, and oblige leaders to focus on relationship building as well as task accomplishment (Badeaux, 1982). Understanding leader communication in nonprofit organizations may help explain the ways volunteers identify with and remain in volunteer groups (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014).

Because groups are “constituted in the dynamic interplay of dialectical tensions, exigencies, and communicative responses” (Johnson & Long, 2002, p. 31), group leadership includes managing dialectical tensions. Kramer (2004) and McNamee and Peterson (2014) present dialectical perspectives in voluntary contexts; however, neither study focuses on the communicative interaction between leaders and followers in managing the tensions using multiple perspectives. For example, Kramer (2004) examined dialectical tensions as perceived by volunteers without exploring how leaders managed them. By contrast, Galanes (2009) used only the leaders’ perspective to explicate manager-subordinate dialectical tensions. In an effort to explore the dialectical tensions of the leader-volunteer relationship more fully, this study examined two community choirs. Community choir members represent one of six broad areas of community service volunteers who enhance a community by contributing to its cultural activities (Salamon & Abramson, 1982).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the dialectical tensions and communication strategies leaders use to manage them in a volunteer context from the perspective of both the leaders and followers. After reviewing the literature on leadership of volunteers and dialectical theory, the manuscript outlines the method employed, presents results from data analysis of interviews and observations from two community choirs, and then provides a discussion of these findings and suggestions for future research.

Review of Literature

Leading Volunteers

Lewis (2013) suggests three traits generally define volunteers: (1) they work of their own free will; (2) they are not paid monetarily; and (3) they seek to benefit others. Clary et al. (1998) identified six primary motivations for volunteering: to be involved; to enact values; to improve a career; to fulfill social obligations; to increase understanding; and for personal enhancement. Leaders of volunteers must appeal to these motivations to both recruit and retain volunteers (Cruz, 2013). The distinctive motivations associated with volunteering highlight that leaders of volunteers face functionally different communication challenges than managers of employee.

Volunteers consider the costs (e.g., time, energy, money) of volunteering versus the benefits gained (e.g., social acceptance, career growth; Lewis, 2013). As a result, they experience burnout, conflict, and power struggles, just like paid workers (Cruz, 2013). To address these issues, Kramer (2006) suggests leaders of volunteers must communicate to provide direction, vision, and coordination. Adding to the challenge, leaders of volunteers must adapt to a perpetually changing membership (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016).

Leaders' communication has a direct relationship with volunteer perceptions (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014) which affect volunteers' feelings of organizational involvement, commitment,

and identification. Additionally, leaders of volunteers must exhibit greater “ability to elicit support and participation from followers through personal qualities rather than through rewards or punishment” (Catano, Pond, & Kelloway, 2001, p. 257). In short, leaders of volunteers have a great deal of influence in retaining and recruiting volunteers and, in doing so, face distinct dialectical tensions.

Dialectical Theory

Dialectical theory is a meta-theoretical perspective that addresses the interplay of opposing and interconnected contextual and motivational forces in relationships (e.g., novelty and predictability; Montgomery, 1993). Dialectical tensions represent contradictions or competing goals that exist simultaneously (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Dialectical theory emphasizes both the simultaneity of differences and unity in forces which pull communicators in multiple directions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Because both competing goals are desirable, tensions can be addressed but never eliminated completely; instead, tensions are managed.

Baxter and Montgomery (1998) offered four sensitizing concepts for identifying dialectical tensions: contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. *Contradiction* means that dialectical tensions are at least bipolar; specifically, they consist of two or more competing forces. These contradictions can be internal or external; they can be unique to the context or general. *Change* deals with the interplay of dialectical tensions over time. For example, over time, a leader will have to deal with multiple dialectical tensions relevant to the group’s life-stage. *Praxis* focuses on the “simultaneous subject-and-object nature of the human experience” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 9). Dialectical tensions occur in the interactions of a given moment of time, but also concurrently structure future interactions and are structured by past interactions (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). *Totality* suggests that dialectical tensions exist in

interconnected relationships with other dialectical tensions. Thus, totality implies that an amalgam of dialectical tensions constitute relationships.

Dialectical theory has been employed to examine familial and peer relationships (Williams & Guendouzi, 2000), romantic partner relationships (Pawlowski, 1998), friendships, culture (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), and organizational relationships. Previous analyses of dialectical tensions in for-profit (Galanes, 2009) and volunteer organizations (Kramer, 2004; McNamee & Peterson, 2014) have identified various dialectical tensions with conceptual similarities but inconsistent labels. For example, Galanes (2009) identified three primary dialectical tensions for small group leaders in traditional work environments. Kramer (2004) described four dialectical tensions in community group theater production. McNamee and Peterson (2014) found four dialectical tensions faced by those in high-stakes voluntary contexts. Though these findings complement one another, there is little reference to the overarching tensions by any of these past works. Therefore, Table 1 was created to synthesize these prior categorizations by identifying four broad categories of dialectical tensions confronting leaders of volunteers: internal and external focus, process and outcome, task and relationships, and leadership and follower. The findings reported below provide an empirical exemplar of this synthesis.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Community choir leaders face each of these four dialectical tensions. A director must balance the *internal and external* dialectical tension by expending efforts on satisfying current choir members, but also on gaining community support and new members. The director must negotiate the *process and outcome* dialectical tension by being sensitive to having a positive rehearsal climate while also emphasizing the quality of the final performance. The director must maintain equilibrium in the *task and relationship* dialectical tension by making sure that choir

members develop relationships but do so without those relationships interfering with the performance quality. Finally, the director must manage the *leadership and follower* dialectical tension by being both the leader who controls and makes decisions and a listener who accepts influence from members and adapts to their preferences.

Understanding the dialectical tensions faced by volunteer leaders can reveal challenges in leading groups not motivated by pay. Following the call for additional examination of dialectical tensions in varied organizational contexts to potentially identify additional dialectical tensions (e.g., Galanes, 2009; Kramer, 2004), the following research question was posed:

RQ1: What dialectical tensions do community choir leaders manage as they communicate with voluntary members?

Baxter (2011) called for dialectical theory research to move beyond description to explain how tensions are managed through communication. Explanation is important with dialectical tensions because a focus on one behavior constrains the ability to focus on the other, and yet both behaviors can be desirable. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) initially identified a wide variety of strategies that individuals used to manage dialectical tensions. These included dysfunctional strategies like denying the tensions or fatalistic resignation to them. Functional strategies included favoring one tension over the other either by spiraling back and forth over time or segmenting them by context; balancing or integrating the tensions simultaneously; or reframing or reaffirming the tensions to make them palatable. Later, Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) condensed tension-management techniques into three broad communication strategies: (1) *Monologic* messages favor authoritative positioning of a one-sided and uni-voiced perspective over the other; (2) *Dualistic* messages manage tensions as a continuum with more focus on one position working in tandem with less of another; and (3) *Hybrid* (or dialogic) messages embrace

both tensions allowing for multiple alternatives to be addressed simultaneously. All three methods “show recognition of contradiction and involve proactive response patterns” (Baxter & Montgomery, 2000, p. 48).

The negotiation of dialectical tensions is an “interpenetration of competing discourses [which] constitutes social reality” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 355). Organizational leaders must focus on managing the oppositional forces of different tensions in order to lead more effectively over time (Barge, 1996). One of the central foci of this study, then, is to identify the interplay of competing discourses leaders used to manage dialectical tensions throughout a project. As Galanes (2009) suggested, dialectical tensions are managed by leaders through both cognitive and behavioral means; thus, examination of communicative responses is particularly insightful. Though both Kramer (2004) and Galanes (2009) examined communication techniques for dealing with dialectical tensions, a comprehensive synthesis of strategies leaders use to deal with tension does not exist. Leaders can deal with dialectical tensions by allowing one tension to dominate (monologism), by favoring one tension while acknowledging the other (dualism), or through a compromise of tensions (hybridization; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: How to leaders of volunteers communicate to negotiate dialectical tensions?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Data were collected as part of a larger research program examining volunteers’ experiences in two community choirs (Kramer, 2011a; Kramer, 2011b; Kramer, 2015; Kramer, Meisenbach, & Hansen, 2013; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014). One was a community-based choir, Middleton Community Choir (MCC, organizations/participants are pseudonyms); the

other was the University Community Choir (UCC). Members of MCC were primarily community members while members of UCC were one-fourth students and three-fourths community members. MCC had approximately 70 to 80 members and put on four performances annually; UCC had between 120 and 150 singers, and performed twice a year. Both choirs have performed for over 30 years. Fine arts organizations, like community choirs, are composed of volunteers who make tremendous time commitments to put on performances (Lewis, 2013). Thus, these comparable organizations serve as valuable venues for leadership research on voluntary members.

At the time of data collection, Nathan was in his second year as MCC's director. Aaron was in his eighth year as UCC's director. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval and both directors' permissions, the second author joined each group and conducted a participant-observation ethnography to gain an understanding of leadership at MCC and UCC. Including practicing and performing, he spent 44 hours with MCC and 33 hours with UCC. During participant observation, the second author made brief "scratch notes," penciled notes on his music or handouts, and "head notes," mental notes of words, phrases, and activities that occurred (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). He transformed these into field notes shortly after the activities, resulting in 106 pages of single-spaced notes for MCC and 82 pages for UCC.

In addition, for both organizations, researchers conducted in-person interviews with leaders and phone interviews with members. Interviews of 55 MCC members, lasting 15-30 minutes, produced 327 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Interviews of 21 UCC members, lasting 20 to 40 minutes, yielded 154 pages of transcripts. For each choir, interviews continued until the point at which no additional insights seemed likely to be gained from additional data gathering (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Interviews included questions such as: "What do you think

of the choir's current leadership?" and "What do you enjoy about being in (choir)?" Leader interviews included questions such as "What were your goals when you became director?" and "What changes have you successfully achieved?" The questions prompted recollection of the competing discourses which constitute the relationship among leaders and members. Complete interview protocols are available from the second author.

Data Analysis

The first author conducted data analysis utilizing a constant comparison method compatible with multiple methods of data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Generally, a constant comparison method begins with data (interviews and field notes) and works to build a substantive theory through a systematic data analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In particular, this analysis enabled the researchers to visit the discursive sites of relationship negotiation through ethnographic and interview data reflecting on relationships (Baxter, 2011). The process described next fulfills the expectation of examining the data, reasoning inductively, and repeating the process by "induction via ongoing data comparisons" (Heath & Cowley, 2003, p. 145). Throughout this process the first author collaborated with the second author, the ethnographer, to improve understanding of the data (Walker & Myrick, 2006).

Given the large amount of data, analysis began with data reduction in order to eliminate topics not related to leadership that were part of the larger research project. The coding process then proceeded with a thorough read-through of the data during which the first author made notes. Following this step, initial category codes describing tensions facing leaders were generated in a second read-through as part of focused coding. Through an iterative process of constant comparison, each new code was compared with previous codes. If data did not fit previous codes, a new code was developed. This process continued with a refinement of codes

through comparison, deletion, and creation based on the data. By employing a dialectical theoretical lens during axial coding, the first author noted instances of tensions in the data identified in the initial codes. Through additional analysis, relationships between initial codes were used to create axial codes. During this process three clear tensions emerged: task and relationship, process and outcome, and internal and external targets. A summary of these codes are presented in Table 2 and exemplars are discussed in the findings.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Findings

The analysis revealed specific topics relevant to leading these community choirs. These included specific dialectical tensions (RQ1) and distinct communication strategies employed by these leaders of volunteers (RQ2).

RQ1: Dialectical Tensions

Task and relationship. The tension between a task and relationship focus has been a central theme of leadership literature since its inception (Yukl, 2012). The interplay of these two functions emerged as a dialectical tension for leaders and voluntary members in two specific task-relationship codes: *dictators and leaders* and *influence and resistance*.

Whereas dictators simply do as they please, leaders create relationships with their followers to accomplish goals. In his interview, Nathan joked that members generally did not question his ideas as MCC's artistic director, allowing him to be a "dictator" much of the time. However, at other times, he had to lead the MCC board and volunteer members into accepting his ideas. Similarly, UCC director, Aaron said, "One conductor may drill until he...or she gets it right. Another person might say something that makes people kind of respond and react, and, and I can't say that I always get that right...." Both directors recognized limits to their authority and

worked to lead by developing relationships with their volunteer members.

The members also recognized that the leaders had to manage this dialectical tension. For example, Sam (MCC) described a “leadership style that is not so democratic” but Bill (MCC) explained:

The leadership is really informal. I think it makes the members feel more at ease, but Nathan is very strategic in what he does. He comes off really laid back. He’s strict, but you don’t know it because he jokes a lot, but he can discipline you without making you feel bad.

Like their leaders, the volunteers described a dialectical tension between communication being strict and demanding like a dictator and informal to facilitate relationship building.

Similarly, there was a dialectical tension between leaders’ influence and members’ resistance. Nathan reflected that when he first led MCC, “The board was difficult because they really thought they were the board of the Vienna Boys Choir or something like that.” Aaron explained “A lot of people in higher education, there’s a certain number of eccentricities...and after you learn about them, in a way, you can’t fight them.” Thus, both leaders acknowledged there was resistance to their leadership, and they had to consider when to exert their influence over that resistance. The leaders faced a complex communication task of balancing firmness and acceptance in leading their volunteers.

The relationship and task dialectical tension was so prevalent in this data (and existing leadership research) that this finding was unsurprising. We introduced this tension category in Table 1 even though previous dialectical literature never explicitly used this terminology. In this setting, leaders of these volunteer groups uniquely dealt with task versus relationship tensions by contrasting dictator and leader practices and by recognizing that their influence was not

authoritative and needed to be tempered in the face of resistance.

Process and outcome tensions. The second major tension that emerged was the dialectical tension of creating a positive *process* while rehearsing and a high quality *outcome* or performance. Volunteer organizations often work with short-time frames which present challenges accomplishing task effectiveness without limiting personal growth and innovation (Goodman & Goodman, 1976). Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) describe this as the interplay between synchronic (at a moment) and diachronic (occurring over time) positioning. In this case, the experience of leaders and members with this dialectical tension was manifested in these specific tensions: *working hard and having fun*, *challenging and easy work*, and *professional quality and amateur volunteers*.

Leaders had to deal with the dialectical tension between members wanting to work hard and have fun. Members recognized the balancing act necessary between work and play. One said of Nathan, “He has expectations. Although he works us hard, he also jokes around.” According to the field notes, Nathan acknowledged during one practice that he was aware everyone was tired from working hard (and so was he), but explained how this experience ought to invigorate and bring everyone back to life. Afterwards a member commented that rehearsal had been enjoyable because it took him away from his daily stresses. Similarly, Aaron explained, “It’s important that you have something that lets people relax.” In short, there is a tension between working hard while volunteering in the evenings and enjoying the process. Leaders helped participants enjoy themselves and work hard to achieve the end goal of an effective performance.

The dialectical tension between easy and challenging tasks was another manifestation of process and outcome tensions. Interviews indicated that established choir members often wanted to perform music that challenged them as singers, but newcomers often found the music very

challenging particularly when sung in foreign languages. A newcomer to MCC commented that she thought the music “would be easier. [It] is pretty challenging, especially to those who have less musical training.” The leaders addressed these concerns at times. The field notes described that after the season’s first rehearsal, Nathan addressed the newcomers. He emphasized that they should not be concerned if they felt a bit lost at times because it will come together over time. In this way, the leaders acknowledged the dialectical tension between easy and challenging tasks.

At the same time, the desire for a professional quality performance was limited by the volunteer singers. The leaders and members recognized that the amateur, volunteer community choir members lacked the skill of work-for-pay professionals. One UCC member explained, “I’m not a professional musician, and I can use all the help I can get. So he [Aaron] does a very good job with us, quote, ‘amateurs.’” Aaron was cognizant of this tension between volunteer and professional singing when he said, “I mean, how...noble is that when you think we’re not doing this because we’re making money from it. We’re not doing this because we really get recognized.” April, a UCC member acknowledged the tension this way; members:

...are volunteering, and that’s wonderful that they can do as much as they can and I really think that’s kind of fun. But sometimes it’s sort of aggravating, because you know somebody hasn’t looked at their music. Or hasn’t even prepared their music. Um...I’ve marked my lines so I know where I’m breathing, I’ve got a pencil.

To partially address this issue, both choirs hired professional soloists to create a professional performance while relying on volunteers for the choral pieces.

Internal and external target tensions. The third primary tension leaders of volunteers frequently faced involved shifting their attention between *internal* and

external constituents, between their roles as leaders of the current group members and as the leaders representing the group to the community. For these community choirs, tensions between internal and external foci appeared in two specific tensions: *narrow community and broad community* and *adding and losing members*.

For the two choirs, the tension between the narrow membership of the group and broader community or audience was present for both. Aaron, explains:

I think it's very important that we have a relationship that shows integration with the community. It's not that we're here [gestures high] and that everybody who doesn't associate with higher education looks up to us and, and aspires to be like us. Um, I think it's important because look at the number of people who are in there.

Nathan felt the need for support of the broader community including financial donations so that they "keep giving, and they do it happily." When explaining why he leads, Nathan also emphasized this internal/external motivational force: "It says that I'm doing something right...that we are being able to communicate not only me with the choir but the choir as a group with the audience." Aaron explained that having a "town-and-gown group" (community and student members) positioned UCC to simultaneously address a narrow and broad community. Aaron acknowledged the balance between university and community voices was important to the success of his choir.

Both leaders felt the need to validate their work with broader community support. Nathan recalled when the group felt great community support when many more people than usual attended a performance. He recounted seeing the choir member's faces beaming, "It was the pride of being a community singer." By contrast, field notes recorded that an audience member thought that the performance built toward the selection's climax effectively, but that the choice

of music was still “boring” to many community members. Leading a community choir means negotiating between with volunteers’ interests as choir members and with broader community interests.

Observations and interviews indicated that both choirs regularly added and lost members. Membership retention was simultaneously an issue and nonissue for both directors. Both acknowledged that retention would be ideal but that members ebb and flow based on what is going on in the volunteer’s lives. Aaron explained that people come and go from community choirs, but he felt a necessity to encourage participation:

You know, I can’t force them to be interested in that work. I wish I could...there are some things that I can’t control and I’m not saying that it doesn’t make me crazy that I can’t, but I intellectually understand and I’m not going to be able to do it.

Here Aaron acknowledged that he felt a tension to keep members in the group, but he cannot shape how others react to different situational exigencies.

Choir members also commented on this issue. On the one hand, choir members suggested turnover was not a problem because “We have a good base to support those that come and go” and those who leave “are replaced pretty quickly.” On the other hand, turnover can be a problem, because, “When you sing with a group of people, you get used to how your voice blends with theirs. So when someone leaves your section, it takes a period of adjustment.” In this way, the members were aware of the need for the directors to focus on retention. The tension of internal versus external foci represents a constant interplay between things under the control and outside of the control of both leaders in regards to who was the target of attention (narrow versus broader community and member retention versus attrition).

RQ2: Managing Tensions

To answer RQ2, the following paragraphs detail how these leaders dealt with tensions through hybridization and dualism communication strategies. Excerpts frequently highlighted multiple tensions in utterances and emphasized interpenetration of tensions in the meaning making process. Specifically, when tensions manifested, leaders avoided monologic reasoning, overtly recognized multiple competing goals, and evoked artistic spirituality and humor to manage dialectical tensions. Most often tensions were not discussed in isolation and were contextualized with a focus on both of the competing goals (dualism). For example, when asked if he would like to gain more choir members, Aaron answered “obviously we could always grow...but...I think...200 plus is plenty.” In acknowledging the competing tensions, Aaron adopts a dualistic management. He explains how busy he is and suggests that more members would make the group better but create more work. This perspective neither rejects nor embraces growth, but communicates both the benefits and drawbacks to such changes.

Leaders and members often discussed tensions simultaneously. This represented both contradiction for a single group of tensions and totality when multiple tension groups were discussed. In his interview, Nathan explained:

Those that want perfection can look elsewhere for their community involvement.

Not that quality isn't important, but you understand that the goal is not to make a perfect concert, but to have fun and communicate something from the heart to the audience.

According to the field notes, he communicated this approach directly to the choir at a rehearsal by saying that if they wanted someone to be stern with them so everything was perfect, they should join another choir; however, at other times, he emphasized quality such as articulating clearly while singing. Through his discourse, Nathan simultaneously managed the interplay of

the task and relationships, process and outcomes, and internal and external audience tensions without completely favoring one over the other. Addressing the complete set of tensions led to the sum of the relationship: totality. By discussing multiple categories of tensions at once, leaders communicated a dualistic approach to manage the simultaneity of tensions.

Field notes and interviews with leaders and members highlighted the importance of recognizing an artistic spirituality (a hybridization) during group participation. “Artistic spirit” served as a metaphor that Nathan explained as we “all are united in one idea which is to make music.” Members noted how working for these choir leaders was unlike their paid work; it offered a fulfilling artistic learning experience. Both Nathan and Aaron discussed managing the evolving dialectical tensions as an artistic spiritual endeavor. Nathan explained creating music, especially in languages foreign to the volunteers, is something “spiritual without being religious.” The field notes recorded him communicating this artistic spirit to the choir when he said if we all made music, there would be no wars since people would unify around music. Aaron explains that there is no individual recognition in a 200-person ensemble. He concluded “there’s something very humane, something very spiritual about people coming together for this.” These leaders appealed to an artistic spirituality as a hybridized strategy for managing the totality of dialectical tensions.

Communicating this artistic spirituality helped manage the tensions across categories of dialectical tensions. Artistic spirituality exemplified choosing to work hard as a volunteer knowing that you were foregrounding the concerns of the choir. Aaron explained that members were not just “presenting” individually; they were “integrating” to enrich “our spirit, our artistic spirit.” Field notes recorded that after a concert, MCC member Jordan commented that it was easy to see why singers do this because there is something emotionally moving about performing

a concert with others. Choir members joined together to create an outcome that transcended individual fulfillment; their contribution was a hybridization of individual benefit and group success. Artistic spiritualizing allowed for a marriage of seemingly incompatible dialectical tensions.

Humor also played a major role in negotiating dialectical tensions. Aaron claims humor is a by-the-book technique for conductors. The field notes recorded numerous examples of both leaders using humorous communication successfully as a discursive resource to diffuse the tension between staying on-task and maintaining personal relationships, between the process of rehearsing and the outcome goals, and between internal and external targets. MCC member Casey explained of Nathan, “He’s professional and I’m very impressed by how he directs, but he’s also very funny.” Joking allowed the leaders to play tensions against each other dualistically or to provide hybridized alternatives.

Addressing the leader versus dictator tension, Aaron explained, using humor allows choir leaders to have a “humane dictator kind of relationship.” Aaron explained that trying to be funny helps balance relationships with the task to allow leaders to coordinate their goals. Choir members realized directors needed to balance this tension as well. One commented, “It’s a volunteer choir, so you can’t be too strict on us like we were in school.” For both leaders, humor was a critical, dualistic strategy for balancing dialectical tensions.

In summary, both leaders managed dialectical tensions through either hybridizations or dualistic strategies. Neither Aaron nor Nathan took monologic stances on the tensions outlined here. Thus, the answer to RQ2 is that leaders of volunteers in these two groups dealt with tension both through hybridization and dualistic communication and emphasized the simultaneous interplay of multiple tensions. Both employed artistic spirituality and humor to relieve and

negotiate tensions.

Discussion

Results from this study use empirical data to synthesize existing efforts towards a group-based dialectical theory. Though some of these dialectical tensions and strategies for managing them were identified in previous literature, others represent a distinctive perspective related to leaders in volunteer organizations. For example, while existing research supports the task versus relationship tensions (Yukl, 2012), results from these community choirs detail issues that may be unique to the context of leading volunteer organizations. Overall, these findings provide a valuable integration of past research and offer insight for tension management by leaders, especially in voluntary organizations. Implications of these tensions and management strategies are discussed below.

Though the task and relationship tension has been uncovered in small groups, the current study extends Galanes' (2009) findings. In managing the tension between leading and dictating, these leaders acknowledge that managing volunteers is challenging and volunteers desire to feel useful (Cruz, 2013). Nonprofit organizations provide a unique reference point compared to work-for-pay organizations because volunteers are rewarded by positive experiences and quality outcomes, rather than money. Volunteers literally referred to goals of having fun. The balance between task and relationship reiterates what a nonprofit board member stated in Galanes (2009): non-profit work is about both hard work and having fun.

Process and outcome represents the diachronic and synchronic tension, highlighting how dialectical tensions function across time (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Though this tension is likely not unique to volunteer organizations, the form taken (e.g., challenge versus easy work) reifies the difficulties facing these community choir leaders. Both leaders framed messages using

hybridization language, like artistic spirituality, and diachronic language in using humor. These communication strategies reiterate that “One force may predominate at any particular point in time or space, but both are simultaneously present and functioning” (Montgomery, 1993, p. 207). The process and outcome tensions were likely exacerbated by the limited time for both personal and professional development due to performance deadlines (Goodman & Goodman, 1976). As Ganesh and McAllum (2012) theorize about volunteerism and professionalism, volunteers occupy a unique role that may constitute a third-space in term of professional traits. That is, volunteer roles are not inherently professional nor are they unprofessional; instead, there is tension between traditional professional roles and the hard work of (amateur) volunteering.

The last tension, internal versus external, serves as a categorical tension that leaders of volunteers faced. These organizational leaders acknowledged that boundaries between tensions were fluid and interplay in their leadership role. Not only did they sense a tension between internal and external forces, but they also acknowledge the tension of amateur versus professional. They faced this tension for both intra- and inter-group considerations. This illustrates that when it comes to dialectical opposition, “phenomena are not separable from one another” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 11). The methods for handling these tensions, especially hybridizations, were also unique in these findings.

The findings also emphasize the intensity and interconnectedness of the tensions in this setting and the challenges for leaders managing them. For example, experienced volunteers want challenging music, but newcomers want easier selections. How the leader manages this process and outcome tension involves listening to volunteers’ suggestions while actively managing task and relational concerns and has implications for retaining current members and recruiting new volunteers. This interconnectedness of the dialectical tensions makes it difficult to evaluate their

relative importance. At the same time, these findings reveal that tensions faced by volunteers likely are not or cannot be managed by monologic discourse.

For these leaders of volunteers, being humorous was a functional consideration for balancing task accomplishments, a strategy not previously uncovered for managing dialectical tensions. Participants acknowledged that humor provided a non-confrontational strategy for managing tensions. As a dualistic strategy, humor minimized the dialectical tensions they faced by having fun with the tensions. Future research can more fully explore how leaders use humor or perhaps other affect tools (e.g. anger, fear) in negotiating tensions in additional volunteer settings. Indeed, a revisit of the literature suggests that humor may be a useful communication strategy for dealing with tensions or paradoxes in workplace settings (Martin, 2004; Tracy, 2004).

Another unique form of tension management identified here was the artistic spirituality metaphor both leaders employed. Rather than minimizing the tensions, this strategy transcends the tensions by calling on a higher order value. Invoking this metaphor suggests these leaders sought to increase motivation and performance outcomes while placing value on the means to accomplish that end. Leaders of volunteers may be able to address the membership and performance issues associated with volunteer work without monetary rewards by communicating the artistic spirituality dimension of the experience. Tensions frequently highlighted the need for leaders to bolster intrinsic motivation (see Deci & Ryan, 2008). Leaders helped volunteers feel rewarded for volunteering their time, effort, and energy with this metaphor. Examining other metaphors that leaders may use to transcend the experience should be a valuable avenue for future research focused on increasing volunteers' internal motivation.

Dialectical Theory and Volunteer Leadership. Each dimension of dialectical theory

informed this analysis: contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. Closer examination of tensions reveals that the contradictions presented here serve as multivocal (as opposed to binary) representations of tensions. That is, several tensions are simultaneously functioning during interaction. For example, the leaders could focus on internal or external goals in multiple ways (e.g., the goals of the group, community involvement, and personal achievement).

Observations from early rehearsals to a final performance revealed the change dimension of managing tensions over time. Leaders and volunteers became more focused on task accomplishments, outcomes, and external targets as the performance became imminent. Future research should examine long-term evolutions of these tensions particularly in light of fluid memberships of volunteers or ambiguous organizational goals.

Praxis was particularly important to these community leaders. This study revealed many tensions between process and outcome and in-the-moment and forward looking responses to tensions that emerge in putting together a performance. Leaders had to deal with competing tensions of task accomplishment and relationship building. Tensions are complex and it seems that leaders of volunteers address multiple goals when negotiating alternative solutions. Leaders of volunteers should be aware of satisfying the proximal and distal motivations of volunteers, particularly because burnout occurs more easily for volunteers (e.g., Capner & Caltabiano, 1993).

These data demonstrated the totality or interconnectedness of the tensions in the “knot of contradictions” in which the inseparability of tensions is emphasized (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Participants rarely discussed tensions in isolation from other competing tensions. Indeed, the quotations included reveal multiple tensions being mentioned in many statements even after the data have been pruned to try to isolate examples. This observation emphasizes the prevalence

and totality of the tensions and the need for leaders to simultaneously play tension sets against one another to accomplish group goals. Future research should explore how totality functions and is managed in employment settings.

A primary goal of this study was to investigate dialectical tensions in volunteer organizations. It provided a comprehensive examination by including observational data and interviews from both leaders and members. However, it was limited to two leaders in the same type of volunteer organization, a community choir. Other volunteer organization leaders likely operate differently and may face different tensions. Still, these data may represent organizations that demand a great time commitment from volunteers (Lewis, 2013).

This study supplements past voluntary and organizational dialectical tension literature by highlighting the situational dependencies of leadership. The ways in which these tensions manifested may reveal theoretically meaningful sub-categories that differ from tensions that exist in organizations with formal reward systems. Both leaders were successful and liked by their members and both used humor and artistic spirituality as communication strategies to relieve tensions. Future research might look at less successful leaders to see if they encounter the same tensions as these popular leaders of volunteers. Leadership is influential to the extent that leaders are able to meet the demands of the situation (Yukl, 2012). Future research should investigate whether or not the tensions presented here occur in other volunteer settings as well as in paid positions.

Conclusion

This study examined the dialectical tensions leaders in two community choirs faced. Offering an empirical synthesis of previous studies, these results revealed leaders dealt with three overarching categories of tensions: task and relationship, process and outcome, and internal and

external targets. Leaders dealt with multiple tensions simultaneously using both hybrid and dualistic strategies. Both leaders employed humor and artistic spirituality as discursive strategies for managing dialectical tensions. Such tension-management strategies have not previously been identified. By including the perspectives of the leaders and the volunteers, this research offers unique insights about the tensions managed by leaders of a voluntary organization and provides a potentially transferable framework for examination of other leaders in volunteer contexts.

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Table 1 *Synthesis of Organizational Dialectical Tensions*

<u>Internal and External Foci</u> Kramer (2004)	<u>Process and Outcome</u> Kramer (2004)	<u>Task and Relationship</u> Kramer (2004)	<u>Leadership and Follower</u> Kramer (2004)
Commitment to group/other life activities	Ordered/Emergent activities	Acceptable/Unacceptable Behaviors*	
Inclusion/Exclusions	Predictable/creative	Tolerance/Judgment	
Community/Selective Group	Precise/flexible	Emotional expression/management	
Unified/Divided Group	Planned/Spontaneous	Friendship/Utility	
Merit/Politics	Acceptable/Unacceptable Behaviors*		
	Volunteer/Professional		
Galanes (2009)	Galanes (2009)	Galanes (2009)	Galanes (2009)
	Process /Outcome Focus	Task/Non-task emphasis	Leader-centered/Group-centered
		Task/Relationship Focus	Leader listening/talking
		Immediate/Off-task discussion	Leader control/relinquishment
		Task/Fun	
McNamee & Peterson (2014)	McNamee & Peterson (2014)	McNamee & Peterson (2014)	McNamee & Peterson (2014)
Attraction/Adjustment	Formalization/Flexibility	Intimacy/Distance*	Ownership/Oversight
Intimacy/Distance*			

* *Indicates the tension fits multiple categories*

Table 2

Summary of Dialectic Tension Categories and Sub-Categories in the Present Study

Task and Relationship

Dictator and leader

Influence and resistance

Process and Outcome

Work hard and have fun

Challenging and easy

Work-for-pay and volunteering

Professional and amateur

Internal and External Targets

Broad and narrow community

Adding members and letting members go
